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“Making Satisfaction in the Rite of Reconciliation”

There are four elements in the Rite of Reconciliation. The first three together are the *matter* of the sacrament and are completed by the penitent. They are contrition, confession, and penance or satisfaction. The fourth element, absolution, is the *form* of the sacrament and is completed by the priest.

Generally when we discuss the *matter* of a sacrament we think in terms of physical matter such as the water in the Sacrament of Baptism. However, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation there is no physical matter used in the rite. So, in establishing the *matter* of the sacrament, St. Thomas Aquinas turned to the “causing” matter. The “thing” that makes the sacrament possible is the contrition, confession, and satisfaction of the penitent.

The item to be examined in this paper is how the penance completed, aka the satisfaction made, by the penitent contributes to the efficacy of the Sacrament. It should be noted that for Thomas Aquinas the Sacrament is for the remission of sins whereas my own understanding includes the remission of sins but I would characterize it as for reconciliation.

I have never liked the term “penance.” The Infoplease dictionary lists its first definition of penance as “a punishment undergone in token of penitence for sin” (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0582467.html>). I think this is indicative of how people see penance today including my own initial understanding of the term. However, I do not see the sacrament as about punishment. The dictionary defines *satisfaction* as “an act of satisfying; fulfillment” (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0637678.html>). This idea of fulfillment may be

more in keeping with what we are after, completing or fulfilling our contrition and desire to amend our ways.

An understanding of the nature of the satisfaction made by the penitent begins with knowing the term used in the early church is *metanoia*. *Metanoia* has been translated as penance but it is not penance in the sense of punishment. Rather, it is better translated as *conversion*. To understand this we need to step back in time. In today's Sacrament of Reconciliation, we tend to see it as something you go to the priest for and is done in a few minutes. This was not the case in the early church and in fact for a significant portion of the history of the Church.

The early church took reconciliation very seriously. In fact, there was debate as to whether the Church even had the power to forgive sins. So as the sacrament began to develop, it developed not just a ritual but a *process* for *metanoia*. Initiation into the Church was seen as a conversion from the ways of Satan to God. Baptism cleansed one from their sins. Thus any subsequent sin was interpreted as a need for a "reconversion" or a "further" conversion. Thus, the development of the Sacrament of Reconciliation mirrored the catechumenal process.

In what would eventually become the Order of Penitents the *process* of *metanoia* went as follows. First, one would be publicly acknowledged as a sinner and thus excluded from the celebration of the Eucharist. They would be dismissed like the catechumens because only the pure and fully initiated could be participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. The penitents would receive catechetical instruction to help them in their conversion. They would also be expected to complete a penance to aid them in their conversion. While it is easy to understand this penance as punishment it is more than that. The penance is an external sign of one's interior contrition for one's sin. In completing the penance we are called to reflect upon the errors, i.e.

sins, we have made. This reflection is to help us in our motivation to once again turn our lives over to Christ.

An assigned penance today may be a few Hail Mary's or Our Fathers or call us to make amends. In the early church, penance could take a few years or even a lifetime. For the first few hundred years of the church's history the penance was publicly done as sin was seen both as a breaking with God and a breaking with the Church so sins would be confessed publicly and penance was for all to see.

The order was important also. First, the penitent would experience some level of *contrition* to make them willing to come forward. (This could include the community calling them to conversion if their sin was publicly known. Then, the metanoia would begin with *confession*, a public admittance of sin. Then the *penance* began along with catechetical instruction and prayers for the penitent by the community. *Absolution* did not occur until the completion of the penance. As with the previous elements, the absolution was a public act so that the community would know the person was restored to full communion and would receive the Eucharist.

Gradually the Sacrament fell into a period of canonical penance where it was more a juridical act than a spiritual conversion. (There was always the hope and possibility for conversion). Through the influence of the Celtic monks, among others, the Sacrament developed into a private act between the penitent and the priest. (Previously the bishop was the sole minister of reconciliation but with the development of private penance, the priest became the representative of the bishop and could absolve sins.) Unfortunately, the notion of the ecclesial dimensions of sin were lost as the Sacrament became a private act.

However, the order of the four elements remained as contrition, confession, penance, and concluded with absolution. Overtime, after the Sacrament became private, there began to be a concern, in light of lengthy penances, would the penitent be able to return without undue hardship to receive absolution after they had completed their penance. Thus, priests began to give absolution immediately after confession with the understanding that the Sacrament was not complete until the penance was completed. In *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* Coffey states

By placing satisfaction after absolution the Church has allowed the lesson to shine through with crystal clarity: divine grace precedes and empowers whatever satisfaction we might make.”¹

It is never our act of satisfaction that gains us forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift from God.

While our penances today are generally completed immediately after absolution in a matter of minutes, the order today is the same as in the twelfth century when penance moved to absolution. The order remains as contrition, confession, absolution, and penance. However, while shorter the purpose of the penance, perhaps better referred to as satisfaction in light of its proper meaning, remains not as simply a punishment for sin but as a means to aid us to pray for and to open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we be truly converted so that we may sin no more. For a significant period in the Church’s history the penance was determined by referring to a prescribed list in the *Penitentials* matching the sin to a penance. Today, the *Rite of Penance* recognizes that circumstances affect what is needed for a penance when it states

The kind and extent of the expiation must be suited to the personal condition of penitents so that they may restore the order that they have upset and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which they suffered (6c).

I believe it is this understanding of the purpose of the penance that is essential to be able to truly experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation simply not as remission of sin but a true

¹ David M. Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2001, 121.

reconciliation with God through conversion. Thus we are restored as members of the Body of Christ and receive the Eucharist. Our reception of the Eucharist is a symbol of our unity with each other and with God and is the ultimate sign that we have been reconciled in God's love.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coffey, David M., *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2001.